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Alternative Affirmative Action: Brazil Edition

Brazil is a country known for its racial diversity and proud history of a mixed-race society. While there seems to be acceptance of such diversity, the current population statistics display the startling truth; Brazil is far from a country of racial equality (Sergio n.pag). In a country where almost 50% of the population is made up of blacks, or “Afro-Brazilians,” they only account for 5% of government congressman (“Brazil” n.pag). This is also true when looking at universities. At the University of Brasilia, a highly selective public university, the overwhelming majority of the student population is white. Since 2003, Brazil has been trying to combat this issue and in 2007 the government declared that its public colleges and universities must reserve, based on a university quota system, 20% of their incoming class to black students (“Brazil” n.pag). However, in a country that prides itself on racial ambiguity, deciding who is Afro-Brazilian and who is not is a difficult task for the government. This new quota system asks Brazilian students applying something they’ve never been asked to do before--identify themselves as black. This system has further complicated race relations in Brazil and has produced a social divide between blacks and whites. To still increase racial diversity in Brazil’s university system but limit the conflict between races, the current racial quota system should instead be based off of the level of income of the family applying to college.

The quality of an education and the role it plays in getting people out of poverty cannot be disputed. A higher education opens the door for advancement and employment, and a better standard of living. College is the chance for poor teenagers to help themselves and their families out of poverty. However, even though almost 50% of Brazil’s population consists of black or mixed-race individuals, this not reflected in Brazil’s university population (Sergio n.pag). At its highest disparity, 98% of undergraduate students at the University of Brasilia were white (“Brazil” n.pag). While there are calls pushing for more racial equality in advertisements and film as well, the need for more opportunities for Afro-Brazilians in higher education is more pressing. Blacks are at a disadvantage from early on, starting with primary education. Those who can afford to, mainly rich white families, send their children to private schools, which are better staffed and funded than the country’s public elementary and high schools. The private high schools have more resources and better prepare its students for the University Entrance Exam, the SAT-esque standardized test all Brazilian students must take to apply to public university (DeGeorge n.pag). The most difficult part of the process, however, is gaining admittance to an exclusive public University, like the University of Brasilia, with over 23,000 yearly applications vying for 2,000 spots (“Brazil” n.pag). And unlike in the Unite States, where factors like essays and letters of recommendation play a big part in the admission process, admission to Brazil’s public universities is solely based on the single University Entrance Exam. Tuition is free to these universities for every student; so once a student gets accepted, regardless of financial situation, the government pays for everything. However, because of poor school conditions of public high schools, poor Afro-Brazilians aren’t given the same opportunities, don’t perform as well on the University Entrance Exam, and thus don’t get accepted into college as often as white students do.

Undoubtedly, black students need greater opportunities to be able to attend college. Of the 16.2 million people living in severe poverty in Brazil, mixed race and black Brazilians make up 70.8 percent (DeGeorge n.pag). But, an affirmative action quota system, based on race, is not how Brail should solve this problem. Instead, the government should introduce a new policy based on income to let the poorest, rather than those who identify as “black” or “Afro-Brazilian” into those quota spots. The number of accepted students from the proposed quota system, as in the current one, would remain the same at 20%. That is, all public universities would have at least 20% of their incoming classes selected from the applicant pool of those who qualified as some of the poorest in the nation. Since these are public universities, the government will see that every family wishing to apply to a public university submits their tax forms from the previous year that will show their level of income. Officials from each school will then first look at all the financial information of their applications. The poorest 20% of those applications will then be put into the special quota application pool. Since students can keep taking the exam as many years as they are willing (and can pay for it), tax forms would have to be sent in and evaluated each year to reflect the family’s current financial situation. There should also be places on the forms where the families can write in about a situation that causes them financial distress, such as sick parent, that may not be reflected in the tax forms.

One of the biggest issues with the current system of affirmative action in Brazil is that it is described to be so much like the United States’ form of affirmative action, with the argument being it will also lead to United States levels of racism (Plummer n.pag). Notable Brazilian anthropologist and scholar Yvonne Maggie lobbied heavily against the current system, saying that it now, unnecessarily, splits Brazil into black and white. These groups now have two different sets of legal rights, which not only cause tension, but manifest itself into conflict as well (“Brazil” n.pag). In 2007, the dorms rooms of African students at the University of Brasilia were burned down and graffiti with Ku Klux Klan symbols was spray painted on the walls (Ceaser n.pag). This racial discrimination will only intensify as the quotas continue with students being more conscious of their race and how it divides them. For example, after the arson occurrence, there were further demonstrations to protest the vandalism. Though black students could still be mistreated under the new plan, the amount of incidents should decrease from the hostility fostered from the racial quotas.

Another advantage to the financial policy is that there is no uncertainty that comes with the nature of racial identity. An ill to society are the methods the government uses to determine who would qualify as an “Afro-Brazilian” under the quota system. For the first time, school students have to identify themselves as being black or white, when in actuality the majority would say they are of mixed race (Plummer n.pag). Anyone can apply as “black,” but the government then decides if they will be allowed to be in the quota applicant pool. This is determined by taking an official government photograph. Everyone who wants to apply must go to a selected location and take a photo under a government issued blue smock, against a neutral background, so no one will strategically use clothing to make themselves appear darker. The government then judges each picture to determine if that person is “black enough” to apply under the quota system. This subjective method has already caused problems amongst Brazilians. In one instance that made headlines, identical twin brothers applied for the quota system, and each of boys took a picture. While one boy was deemed Afro-Brazilian, the other wasn’t, showing the inconsistency and subjectivity of this system (Soares n.pag). With financial records, there is no room for ambiguity; there’s the concrete numbers of tax documents. The only need for a committee to evaluate a particular case would be if the family has a special circumstance; other than that, this would be an objective process. In addition, this would be much less of a cost to the government than current affirmative action system. Instead of funding dozens and dozens of photo stations so the students who want to apply as black can get evaluated, there would only need to be a few people hired to evaluate these alternative financial situation claims.

There has been talk about implementing this system, based on income, in the United States as well. This, however, wouldn’t work as effectively as it would if implemented in Brazil because of population make-up. While there is a higher percentage of blacks that are poor in the United States, there are still an overall larger number of poor whites. If a plan were executed based on income, this greater number of poor whites would fill the spots in the quotas. In Brazil, however, the population is much more racially diverse. About 51% of Brazilians defined themselves as being ‘black’ or ‘brown’ in the 2010 census (“Affirming” n.pag). This means that more even mix of people would be filling those spots, rather than them being all filled by poor whites, which is what would happen if America used this system. Therefore, the goal of gaining a more racially diverse university student population would still be achieved in Brazil. Plus, there is no added issue of an extra cost to implement the new quota system. Since the government already pays for every student’s tuition at a public university- black or white or mixed race- and the original number of students accepted to the university would not be changing, there would no added cost for the government to pay.

While this new policy would have many supporters, there would still be people who would be against it. This includes those who are already against the current affirmative action program, or any other form of affirmative action. What they should understand is that poverty is a hard cycle to break, but one of the most effective ways to get out of it is through education. With all the prospects offered by a college education, an impoverished Afro-Brazilian will be able to get a job, send back money and even give back to their home community, having the potential to help it prosper. Another group that would be against the new quota system would be those in favor of the old affirmative action program, which directly admitted qualifying black and mixed-raced Brazilians into the public university system. They would be worried that since it is now based on income, there wouldn’t be as many Afro-Brazilian admitted into public universities. However, because of Brazil’s population dynamics, there would only be a marginal number of poor whites, with the majority still being poor black students who will get accepted under the new quota program. Plus, these Afro-Brazilians would be admitted without the hostilities, tension, and danger of dividing a society based on black and white.

While the problem of racial inequality cannot be ignored, the more practical way to establish more Afro-Brazilians in public universities would be to establish the quotas based on income, rather than by race. The current affirmative action plan causes tension, splits, and conflicts between sectors of the population. Instead of demeaning, subjective photographs, all families would have to do to see if they qualify would be to turn in their tax forms. While there is a potential for fraud, this system does not divide the country into “black” or “white,” and most of the application process for the quota can be done in privacy, unlike standing for a picture with the current system. In addition, the current quotas bring unnecessary racial tension between blacks and whites. Social workers in Brazil have determined that implementing affirmative action just directs more attention to race in a country that is known for being racially diverse and free of discrimination. In a country as large and varied as Brazil , the university population should be more diverse, and implementing a quota policy based on income will help Brazil go against this disparity.

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